

For  
Mrs. Chappell  
March 12

Some reflections upon American Romantic Painting  
by - Jean K. Dickie

[One speaks most easily of what one is truly interested  
in or loves.]

March 12, 1975

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I The Oxford English dictionary traces the word  
ROMANTIC from old French and modern Latin,  
to refer to the qualities of romance in respect  
of form or content: stressing the  
subordination of Form, in the ordered  
classical sense, to Theme as it is  
informed by imagination or passion.  
That is - in literature or art  
The Romantic form goes beyond what  
is rational or practical.

II In Europe the triumph of imagination  
over reason began in the 1600's. The  
movement climaxed before <sup>about the time of Delacroix,</sup> 1850; + Chopin  
and then survived <sup>only</sup> as a state of mind  
in certain individuals rather  
than as a cohesive tendency in art.

It is this highly individual quality of  
American Romantic art that struck  
me when, as a young painter, I  
had the opportunity to meet certain  
American members of this family of  
minds. such as poet Robinson Jeffers,  
the photographer Edward Weston and  
the painters Morris Graves and  
Paul Dougherty. My own mother,  
a true poet, once gave me a  
photograph of an early American  
primitive painting showing a  
mother with a magic wand  
initiating her daughter into the  
~~magical~~ mysteries of moonlit nature.



For the real mystery ~~appeared~~ <sup>seemed</sup> to be in the individual himself or herself, an artist, frequently without affiliations with any particular school, who appeared magically upon the American landscape.

It is nonetheless natural that, as a nation, we have developed many traditions and schools of art. Imbedded in some of these were romantic artists.

The early Hudson River School <sup>in the East</sup> was largely romantic in nature.

The recent New York School was given impetus by the romantic artist Jackson Pollock. Before that, there was the New York "Ash Can" School of realism including ~~Robert Henri~~ <sup>George Bellows</sup> + John Sloan.

The Middle Western School counted

John Stewart Curry + Thomas Hart Benton both romantic in their approach.

Then there are the West Coast Schools divided between Los Angeles + San Francisco.

But it is of the solitary romantic artists that I would speak such as those two moderns Morris Graves and Mark Tobey who worked alone in Seattle; and though one of them lived a block from the campus gate neither was ever invited to teach at the University of Washington.

Recently, a cousin of mine, head of the Philosophy Department at Jrvine University in Southern California



asked if I would enquire of Graves if he would consent to be artist in residence there. It was now too late. He refused.

Before we go on I should like to emphasize that early American artists + writers did contribute something to romantic art in Europe; then, when this spirit waned abroad it continued here at home as an independent and individual activity.

- (3) What are the themes we associate with Romantic art, Music and literature as opposed to classical subjects + forms?

First, Themes of Romantic art are high in emotion, regulated more by instinct than reason. Long ago, the Greeks recognized this difference in their worship of the two complementary Gods, Apollo + Dionysius. Apollo stood for order, clarity and light and was associated with the Sun. He was the classical principle. Dionysius represented the irrational in life: the fructifying darkness and fertility of earth, and the surprising powers of the subconscious mind, linked somewhere with the primordial creative principle.

Themes of Romantic art require close communion between artist and audience. This audience is of necessity somewhat limited, since it must be able to respond to feelings of solitude and sublimity, scale, fantasy and distance, as well as loneliness and pain. The Romantic artist explores the darker and more dramatic aspects of Nature. But the American artist has a toughness of thought and a respect for hard facts as a starting point toward idealization.



(4)

Among our Romantic writers we think of  
 Washington Irving James Fenimore Cooper  
 William Cullen Bryant Edgar Allen Poe  
 Nathaniel Hawthorne Charles Norris  
 John La Farge  
~~Henry D. Thoreau~~ Robinson Jeffers  
~~Stephen A. Benson~~  
 Herman Melville  
~~Eugene O'Neill~~

"There in the West" Emerson thought, "lay Nature sleeping."

### Among Painters

Benjamin West was a great precursor. He went to London, as did his pupil Washington Allston. The latter was the first true American Romantic painter; and when he returned to his home in Massachusetts in the 1820's he was host to most of the celebrated men of his period. His Rise of a Thunderstorm at Sea is considered to have inaugurated the American Romantic Landscape tradition. His idyllic spirit in composition foreshadows that of the great <sup>modern</sup> Albert Ryder of whom we shall speak later.

Samuel F. B. Morse was a pupil of Allston and in 1828 he painted a romantic portrait of a Greek Boy engaged in the Greek war for independence. W. C. Bryant composed a poem in honor of Morse and his portrait. Morse worshipped Allston. Later he, Morse, was to become absorbed in telegraphy.

Some know American Landscape painting began in the East, and then I was to glorify the great West.



In the East we think of  
Thomas Cole                      Asher Brown Durand  
Frederick Edwin Church      + Thomas ~~Durand~~ Moran,

These were painters of vast scenes and vistas, waterfalls, (like the Niagara) cliffs and rain bows.

Much later appeared The American genius, Winslow Homer. Known as a devotee of hard fact, an expert illustrator for Harper's Weekly during the civil war, his Romantic cast soon led him to create some of the greatest Romantic pictures in America.

Consider <sup>in which</sup> "The Gulf Stream". A large canvas <sup>↗</sup> ~~is~~ a Caribbean negro alone in a shattered life boat, surrounded by sharks is tossed on a magnificently colored sea. In the distance a ~~typhoon~~ ~~or~~ waterspout approaches, while a possible rescue ship under full sail passes by on the distant horizon to which the negro's back is turned.

As a solitary recluse at Prout's Neck Maine, in his later years Homer would wait a full year for the exact mood of sea, sun or moon to suit his mind. He was to lie in wait for the rare or ~~extra~~ exceptional phase of Nature, especially the dramatic. Among his most glorious works are his watercolors of the natural scene, a deer drinking, a guide pausing to scan the hills.



Equally individual was Albert Ryder whose broad areas of sky and cloud, earth or sea seem bathed in a spiritual light. Since I have no slides to accompany this talk I have brought a reproduction of a small painting by Ryder in The Duncan Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. It is a moonlit scene of a sea-cove, the presence of man indicated by only an empty boat. This little picture <sup>with its mystical overtones</sup> might well give you an impression of the whole meaning of American Romantic art.

From it you can see that Ryder was a forerunner of Abstract design. That the late Edward Weston, photographer, admired Ryder is not generally known. <sup>But so he told me.</sup> Nor should we forget James McNeill Whistler with his nocturnes and harmonies of painted music, and his magical evocative etchings of persons and places.

Animals were a subject much favored by Romantics. In Europe they could be found in zoos where the great sculptor Antoine Barye studied his models. In America, the real Buffalo was soon introduced into painting by primitive and sophisticated painters alike. In Santa Barbara there is a marvellous primitive painting of an Indian on a white horse taking aim with bow & arrow.



against the black & hairy beast.  
It is said Matisse and Fernand Léger,  
Picasso's friend much admired  
this canvas on their visits to America.

During 8 years of hazardous  
wanderings in the <sup>Western</sup> wilderness  
George Catlin persuaded war-like  
Indian chiefs to pose for him.  
He paved the way for such artists  
as Russell and Remington who  
painted ~~the Indians~~ and sculpted  
the Indian's successor the western  
cowboy on his cow pony, or sitting  
silently on the lonely American  
starlit landscape with the  
evening fire nearby -

Catlin  
He had  
seen a  
group of Western  
Indians on his  
way to  
Washington  
& resolved  
to devote  
his life to  
recording  
them

Audubon shocked his contemporaries  
with dramatic water-colors of  
Eagles and Hawks carrying snakes  
and Rabbits through the air.  
But ~~the~~ <sup>Audubon's</sup> first folio was published  
in Edinburgh in the land  
of Romantic Sir Walter Scott.

Let us not forget George Caleb Bingham  
of Missouri. In 1845 he painted  
a haunting masterpiece. Titled "Fur Traders  
Descending the Missouri" it shows  
a French Voyager and his Half  
Breed Son floating down the  
Missouri in a pirogue of heavy  
canoe. ~~It is~~ It is a hazy  
day, the motion of the river



glassy, The ghostly ship slides into view, and in the prow sits a captive <sup>E.A.</sup>Poe-like bear, the object of civilization's wonder, and symbol of the free life in the great woods. This picture lives in eternal stillness, intensity and light. The two trappers stare straight out at their audience. The color is exquisite.

15 minutes

(5) Of necessity I have omitted the names of other important figures in the Romantic tradition: not only painters, but poets, playwrights and musicians. But since our concern today is chiefly with the painters, let us pass on to more contemporary figures.

In this year of emphasis on the liberation of women, let us remember Georgia O'Keeffe, still living at an advanced age in the high deserts of New Mexico. A woman of strange and fascinating sensitivity, she married the dealer and photographer Alfred Steiglitz who maintained Gallery 291 and later an American Place in New York City in the early 1900's. Steiglitz played a significant - ~~part of an~~ even crucial part - in



The development of modern art in America. Our most advanced and distinguished artists frequented his Gallery - John Marin, The Maine water-colorist, worthy successor to Homer; Arthur Dove abstract Landscapist; Marsden Hartley (whom Carmel's Jeanne Cherry counted as a friend); Charles Sheeler, ~~and~~ <sup>Max Weber</sup> and many others.

Steiglitz had made the first sympathetic photographs of immigrants arriving in New York Harbor & Ellis Island. Later he photographed clouds as poems. In 1913 Arthur B. Davies & others who worked around Steiglitz produced a great modern exhibition at New York's Armory. American art received new impetus. In 1930 Steiglitz made marvellous photographic portraits of the Head and Hands of O'Keefe. He had recognized in her early water-colors a unique talent. Today she is known for mysterious oil paintings of flowers with psychological overtones, and paintings of the buildings & surroundings of the Tass Indians.

In this period also The water-colorist Charles Burchfield imbued nature with a Gothic mystery.

of the same generation

~~the same~~ Edward Hopper

was to record the loneliness of American highways & railroad tracks



X  
and the true isolation of figures  
in a crowd, or in the movie theatre.

Pollock  
De Kooning  
+  
Kline.  
Then  
Newman  
+ Rothko  
simplified  
the image.  
There were  
painters  
in color  
alone.  
Surprisingly  
working  
in  
Washington  
DC.

~~The~~ modern abstract expressionism  
had many practitioners. Perhaps  
now you may go to modern  
exhibitions and pick out  
your own Romantics. There  
are so many "isms" and  
names, non objective, realist,  
minimalist, etc. But here  
and there you will stumble on  
the true Romantic temperaments.  
I should like to speak again  
of the mystic Morris Graves.  
He had a mystical temperament  
before he visited a Japanese  
Zen Buddhist monastery.  
He is a painter of the  
"ligner eye" about <sup>once when I asked him</sup> his birds  
with closed eyes,  
He answered sleep, he ~~stated~~ <sup>stated</sup> through  
this transitional period  
waiting for the new  
awakening in a better age.



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I ~~the~~ painter, says Morris Graves,  
"to rest from the phenomena  
of the external world."

Now all these persons are  
not impelled by  
egocentric emotion. They  
celebrate an inner and  
an outer landscape and  
mythology, as well as the  
heroes of daily life in an  
untamed land.

⑥ Many of them <sup>soon</sup> discovered that  
they had one  
thing in common.

They adhered to the dictates of no  
school. They founded no schools.  
They, like our early primitive  
painters, rose individually  
like apparitions on the  
great American landscape  
which was so well suited to their nature.



Naturally, The degree of romantic temperament in each varied, and was sometimes overlapped by classical tendencies. Some developed a highly refined realism suited to their Romantic purposes -

So now, I hope I have given even a glimpse of this somewhat obscure side of the American genius; and evoked among you some sympathy for this American achievement.

As you look once more at the Ryder moonlight ~~we~~ ~~can~~ ponder the words of Marsden Hartley. - ~~The~~ His statement concerning Ryder could have applied equally to himself.

"I have known in Ryder that wisdom which is once and for all wisdom for the artist, that confidence and trust that for the real artist there is but one agency for the expression of self in terms of beauty, the eye of the imagination, that mystical, third eye somewhere in the mind which transposes all that is legitimate to expression."

I thank you very much D.K.D.



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